

America at Risk: Closing the Security Gap

Introduction

No responsibility of the Congress is more important to the security of our nation than the exercise of vigorous and thorough oversight of the new Department of Homeland Security. Implementing the largest reorganization of the federal government in almost forty years would be daunting enough. Given the urgency, however, to prevent, deter and respond to terrorist attacks – and knowing failure is not an option – the Administration, the new Department and its congressional overseers face a challenge unlike any in our history.

A lack of leadership or focus, or errors in prioritization or judgment can place the lives of thousands of Americans at greater risk. Poor management can result in the waste of taxpayer dollars, as multi-billion dollar contracts are awarded under pressure to get the job done.

America at Risk: Closing the Security Gap is the product of our commitment to steadfastly pursue our duty of congressional oversight on this first anniversary of the formation of the new department. We have relied upon our own independent investigations and research, as well as a broad range of respected expert opinion. This report highlights significant security gaps that still remain and offers recommendations to close those gaps that threaten the security of every American.

One year ago, on March 1, 2003, the Department of Homeland Security was formally established to protect the American people, the American economy, and, ultimately, American society from a terrorist attack. The origins of the Department trace back to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. On that day, as we absorbed the full horror of what had been done to us, we vowed that we would never again allow our defenses to be circumvented so easily.

In the wake of the attacks, the Congress united to act with unprecedented unity and speed. The Administration was authorized to take a variety of actions to protect us from terrorists, including the use of military force against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In the months following September 11, legislation was enacted to bolster security at our seaports and airports, fortify our borders, and provide our intelligence and law enforcement communities with the tools needed to root out terrorists here and abroad. We worked together to create the Department of Homeland Security.

We are safer today than we were before the attacks of September 11, but the critical question is – are we as safe as we need to be?

It remains an uncomfortable but unassailable fact: America is not as safe as it needs to be in the face of the threat we face from those that seek to do us harm. Critical gaps in our homeland security continue to exist while al-Qaeda and like-minded groups continue to seek ways to kill our citizens, destroy property and infrastructure, disrupt our economy, and demoralize our nation. Our enemies are opportunistic, and will remain fixated on identifying and exploiting our weaknesses. We must remain vigilant in bolstering our homeland defenses as rapidly and effectively as we can to protect ourselves from any possible terrorist attack. As we move forward to strengthen our security we must be mindful that properly made, homeland security-related investments also offer substantial benefits in such critical areas as public health, crime prevention, technology development, the free flow of commerce, and all-hazards preparedness.

The men and women who patrol our borders, inspect cargo at our ports, analyze intelligence, and respond to emergencies, are setting the standard for excellence, but they must have the leadership and support they deserve. On this first anniversary of the Department of Homeland Security, our national homeland security efforts do not reflect the sense of urgency required in light of our enemy's declared intent to carry out an even greater event than occurred on September 11, 2001.

To protect the homeland, we must be alert in identifying our security gaps, inventive in determining the most effective ways to overcome them, and diligent in ensuring that such gaps never exist again.

We are mindful that efforts to date to secure the homeland have resulted in billions of dollars in new federal, state, and local expenditures. Any investment must be analyzed in terms of costs and benefits. While post-September 11 expenditures at the federal level are significant, some perspective is needed. For example, since September 11, we have increased annual discretionary spending for the agencies that now make up the Department of Homeland Security by upwards of \$15 billion. During the same period, we have increased our defense budget by upwards of \$135 billion. For fiscal year 2005, the Administration seeks an increase of about \$4 billion in total spending for the Department – an amount equal to one month's cost of the war in Iraq. We must succeed in achieving stability in Iraq. But in the broader War on Terror, we must commit whatever is necessary to protect the homeland. The cost of failure would far exceed any investment we make.

Our vision for homeland security includes a commitment to aggressively target terrorists wherever they may hide and invest in policies that will, over the longer term, prevent the rise of future terrorists. We are engaged not only in a conflict of will but a conflict of ideals, religion, history, and culture that stirs the irrational violence we know as “terrorism.” Throughout our history, Americans have met and overcome great challenges through firm resolve and sacrifice. America continues to offer the world’s best hope and promise of freedom and prosperity for all people.

In this report, we identify significant security gaps and propose ways to close them, not for the purpose of casting blame, but to make America stronger. We call on the Administration and our colleagues in Congress to take swift action on these recommendations to close the security gaps we now face. Our nation deserves nothing less.

Representative Jim Turner, (D-TX)

Ranking Member

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